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**RESEARCH**

# Playing the Zombie: Participation and Interpassivity in Gothic XR

Sarah O'Brien

Teesside University, GB

[s.obrien@tees.ac.uk](mailto:s.obrien@tees.ac.uk)

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Marina Warner states that the concept of the zombie 'embodies the condition of our time' as it represents contemporary experiences of selfhood shaped by new technologies (2006: 357–8). In this paper I argue that, due to the interactive and immersive qualities of XR, the concept of the zombie in some recent Gothic expressions does not just represent contemporary experience of selfhood but is a development of an 'interpassive' role we play in everyday life (Pfaller 1996; Žižek 2008). Interpassivity is seen to be the 'underside' to interactivity, degrading any authentic experience or contribution of the individual. In some cases, the interpassive role in Gothic participatory experiences can be seen to be a cathartic extension of this everyday interpassive experience. However, the addition of a sadistic element to this role can lead to a 'zombie-participant' experience, which is a perverse and Gothic resistance to interpassivity. The paper focuses on two XR events that strive to reclaim the authentic self in what can be interpreted as a plight to recover the authenticity of individual experience within the closed loop of XR experience. The first is *Whist* (2017) by AΦE, where there is an attempt to reify the self through the trigger of the participant's gaze. This results in an interpassive experience that demotes agency: rather than interpret the self, Freudian discourse is seen to 'stand in' for it, thus reflecting an interpassive state. The second is *Doom Room* (2018) by Makropol, where there is an attempt to reclaim the soul through re-birth via self-sacrifice. 'Doom Room' entwines the story of interpassivity with a sadistic interactive design, resulting in a destabilisation of 'self' that ultimately resists the interpassive experience.

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**Keywords:** Interpassivity; Virtual Reality; Participatory Performance; Immersive Theatre; Gothic; survival horror videogames

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## Introduction

In the entertainment industry immersive interactive 'scream' experiences where audiences are locked in rooms, herded around haunted houses, dungeons, mazes or forests are highly popular and in abundance. These experiences of horror overlap

with other, more experimental approaches to the Gothic, particularly in VR and, more broadly, XR performance where physical realities work alongside the virtual to produce horrifying effects. Interestingly in these performances the subject position through which we engage with the work radically opposes the kinds often promoted by most liberally orientated participatory art. We are abused, dominated, pushed around and often made to do things that we are not necessarily comfortable with (but have already signed our lives away before we entered). The lack of audience agency and co-authorship within these experiences is probably the reason that the more experimental approaches to the Gothic get conflated with practices that are seen under the umbrella of light entertainment. This can be seen to be Gothic history repeating itself. In 1969 Robert Hume discusses how early approaches to Gothic fiction were also tarnished with the 'sub-literary depths of romanticism' (1969: 282). However, in outlining the journey between the early novels to the later ones, he identifies tropes and effects that can also be seen in contemporary developments within horror video gaming. In making these connections it is clear that XR experiences, like digital games, are interactive forms that can, and do, produce the same horror effects. And, these effects as a creative practice are linked to a wider Gothic agenda; a genre that has questioned and destabilised rationalism since the Enlightenment.

According to Robert Pfaller, participatory arts can be seen to be part of the utopian ideology of interactivity where, since the 1960s, participation is seen as a good thing that will change society for the better (2017: 3). VR has a parallel utopian story to tell as it is widely associated with ideas of making us better humans and romantic fantasies of transcending the bodily self, with associations of flying and dreaming. Following Slavoj Žižek (1997), Pfaller proposes 'interpassivity' as the underlying counter practice to the ideology of interactivity. Interpassivity is where an interactive system fulfills its own feedback function in place, but in the name of, the subject ((2000) 2017). It is where the work of art already functions as its own audience, for example, the Chorus of the Greek theatre. And, this is seen to be a function readily accepted by the exhausted consumer who can secretly 'opt out' while being 'seen' to consume. Gijs van Oenen develops the concept of interpassivity and argues that

the project of the Enlightenment that engendered interactive participation for the benefit of all humans is part of an ideology that, conversely, is also making us less human (2016). We are becoming exhausted interpassive subjects who are opting out of feeding a civic society that persistently and relentlessly demands our feedback to further its systems of power and progress.

Van Oenen views the interpassive subject not only as exhausted, but as playing their interactive roles through a form of anxiety. The Gothic genre is a reaction to the anxieties brought on by the rational logic of the Enlightenment (Hurley 2004; Botting 2013). And, the interpassive experience can be seen to be very close to the one enjoyed by those engaging with recent creative work in the Gothic genre. In this paper I develop an understanding of the interpassive role within the Gothic genre and examine the significance of the addition of sadism within the interpassive experience. Understood together, sadism and interpassive subjectivity form a new subject position that can be found in much interactive Gothic work today – from video games to XR. This position resembles all of the tropes of the zombie and is therefore typically Gothic in that it is a role that breaks down the dichotomy of form and content: we watch the zombie, we play the zombie. And, it is this doubling of the interpassive subject of everyday life that serves as a Gothic remedy.

The two XR experiences I examine in the final section each make the same promise; to uncover the authentic self via uncanny and disturbing experiences. This may appear to follow the utopian promises of the Enlightenment but in their pursuit for the authentic subject, they outline many of the reasons why they remain interpassive with stark clarity. The first is *Whist* by AΦE, where, rather than interpret the self, Freudian discourse is seen to interpassively 'stand in' for it within a virtual experience that distances us from our own agency. This XR experience serves to demonstrate how not all interpassive subject positions can be understood as 'playing the zombie', and therefore not as developed in contemporary Gothic expression. The second is *Doom Room* by Makropol, which frames a journey of transcendence through an Artaudian discourse of ritual, raw flesh eating, raw hearts and body washing leading to self-sacrifice/suicide and re-birth. Its themes of sacrifice and suicide give context to the ending where there is the loss of intersubjective reality.

In using the form to destabilise the clear distinction between the physical world and the virtual, the position is truly zombifying.

### **Interpassivity, Participatory Art and the Zombie**

Interactivity in VR has developed from a notion of 'users' and is therefore based on a feedback loop between the actions of the participants and the game design. Within this interactive relation there is little room for anything other than just 'doing'; supplying the 'mechanisms of regulation' with your bodily actions as feedback that support the system (Gekker 2018: 221). For a system to support independent agency it must first offer a position in which the participating subject is given the space to co-produce with, or operate beyond, the feedback loop of design. However, within the culture of participation in general this 'emancipation' of the subject is hotly debated. For most, interaction with digital media on an everyday basis is far from emancipatory. Referencing Gordon and Walter 2016, and Sampson 2016, Alex Gekker states that 'The same things that make videogames enjoyable – carefully curated interaction loops, clear conditions of success and failures, immediate feedback – have become integrated into our work routines with the rise of efficiency management and gamification (2018: 221). We are therefore rarely able to step outside these controlling mechanisms of 'ludic capitalism' (Galloway 2012). This instrumental form of interactivity has become an everyday reality in both our work and play arenas and, rather than allow us agency, we are burdened with the continual responsibility of providing a system with our feedback.

For Žižek interpassivity is a theory of culture and media that illuminates a type of relationship the viewer has with some forms of art and media such as film and TV. Briefly, within this relation, interpassivity is where the object or the 'other' does the 'enjoying' for you – it 'observes itself' – providing its own system with the feedback it requires so you are freed from doing so. The classic example given by Žižek is that of canned laughter where the object laughs for you. Interpassive practice continues via contemporary media through acts such as 'following' others and bookmarking articles or videos to read/watch for later (often not returning to do so). We know that the object does not *really* enjoy or

follow these things for us, but we support the illusion of 'it' enjoying by imagining a 'naïve' observer (Pfaller 2003). Following thousands of people on social media might mean that 'an anonymous naive observer' could think that you are really very active. Interpassivity therefore means that if you can still *be observed* to interact with a system then you can still consume but without the burden of it having your continued attention.

Pfaller has stated that, unlike interactivity, interpassivity is not an ideological standpoint but a theory that reveals the actual activities within an interactive system, whereas the discourse on 'interactivity' is an ideology that revives 'old wishes and utopias' (2017: 3). These utopias Pfaller refers to are liberal ideologies where, since the 60s, participation and freedom through interactive 'choice' is seen as being inherently 'good'. However, in a move away from Pfaller and Žižek, van Oenen states that 'Interpassivity is not to be understood as a timeless, universal structure of human subjectivity, but as a contingent, historical phenomenon that came into being with the rise of modernism' (2016: 7). Van Oenen calls this problem the 'dialectic of Enlightenment' where the Kantian notion of the modern individual meant emancipation for that citizen via interactive citizenship. Now however, this has been overtaken by interpassivity as 'interactive fatigue'. The ideology of interactive citizenship 'is just as much a liberating and empowering experience, as it is, or became, a pressing and even paralyzing obligation' (Van Oenen 2010: 305).

In participatory art, notions of interactivity, along with participation remain part of an ongoing debate about the possibility of having, or providing the opportunity for, authentic agency and genuine co-production between participant and artist within works of art and broader cultural engagement (Bourriaud 2002, Rancière 2007, Bishop 2012, Machon 2013, White 2013, Harvie 2015, Alston 2016). This has incited some academics to identify certain forms of participatory experiences as purely commercial 'non-art' as they continue capitalist exploitation or uphold a neo-liberal agenda. Adam Alston states that the rise of the Immersive Theatre phenomenon in participatory art is a continuation of the 'experience economy' (a term coined by Pine and Gilmore, 1998):

Along with theme parks, themed restaurants, experiential marketing, and so on, immersive theatre is preoccupied with the provision of stimulating and memorable experiences, and an objectification of audience experiences according to a logic that chimes with the commodification of experience elsewhere in the experience economy (Alston 2016: 16).

Alston's view of the 'productive participant' within such activities outlines the 'good consumer' who meets the expectations of an interactive culture – the more you put in, the more you get out. There is no interpassive 'rest' for the audience of such experiences and their output is labour that feeds the system. Mischa Twitchin refers to such immersive theatre experiences as the 'instrumentalisation of experience' where: '[...] the audience becomes a consumer, the exemplar of a zombie culture, where the distance that makes for fascination, curiosity or imagination is short-circuited in the name of an 'immersive experience' making the audience of these events 'organic plug-ins' (Twitchin 2019: 145). If the audience feels this way then her/his agency within the work is effectively drowned out by the equivalent of canned laughter. It is the feeling of not actually being responsible for the work that they are apparently producing or are part of that really defines the interpassive subject and not just the artwork alone. For example, Dierdre Heddon et al critique one-to-one performances where audience are obliged to 'give good audience' (rather than be themselves) in order to maintain the work and to not disappoint the artist (2012: 124). In participatory art these interpassive experiences are portrayed as inferior to works where the participant is seen as a co-author and who has a feeling of making a difference to the work itself. The dominant and pervasive view in immersive and participatory arts then, is to critique work where the participant's activities are as an interpassive subject.

For Pfaller, interpassivity is a theory of a practice, not an ideology, thus interpassivity is only ideologically loaded within particular artistic expressions. Therefore, the interpassive subject in participatory art should not be seen as an essentially negative. Claire Bishop takes a closer look at the idea of interpassivity in her chapter on 'Delegated Performance' (2012). Bishop describes this use of bodies



within art as being an expression of interpassivity: 'Interpassivity is the secret language of the market, which degrades bodies into objects, *and it is also* the language that artists use to reflect on this degradation.' (Bishop 2012: 235. Emphasis in original). Reflection is key here, because a participant may be engaging interpassively but if this is not reflected upon, then it is seen as continuing the exploitation rather than commenting upon it. Bishop refers to Pierre Bal-Blanc's view that in doubling this perversity, delegated performers employed by artists can situate their work as a contrast to the institutional practice of doing so and therefore 'jolt' the viewer into seeing this perversion (2012: 236). Interpassivity here is shown as a form of resistance to itself – as a 'wake-up call' to its everyday prevalence. As well as outlining this resistance, Bishop also recalls the pleasure that interpassivity can have for those who engage in this way, and this pleasure is a little different to the one described by Pfaller. She refers to Pierre Klossowski's thesis (1970) that argues there is a 'mutual imbrication of the economy and pleasure' and delegated performance places the artist in a 'Sadecian position, exploiting because s/he knows from experience that this exploitation and self-display can itself be a form of pleasure' (*ibid*, 233–236). Delegated performance is not only an ironic doubling of an individual's everyday exploitation, but a doubling that they also get *sadistic pleasure* from.

Bishop's study focuses on paid 'non-professionals or specialists in other fields' that perform on behalf of the artist (2012: 219). But, in participatory art and XR, interpassive experience is undertaken by a paying participant, so Bishop's thesis cannot be mapped onto this experience directly. The presence of the 'viewer' in delegated performance (the actual viewer of the artwork, not the delegated performer) ensures that the delegated performer maintains a critical distance to her/his 'exploitation'. The 'jolt' described by Bishop is because an actual viewer replaces the imaginary 'naïve' observer of the interpassive act. Without this triangle of artist-delegated performer-viewer, interpassive practice might well resemble the purely commercial, uncritical and/or exploitative experiences described by Alston and Twitchin. However, if the imaginary person whom the participant is performing for is the designer of the experience, who is inflicting the abuse, then sadism alters the subject's conception of the naïve viewer within the interpassive act. I use the

word 'designer' rather than artist carefully here because the creator of XR experiences must work more closely with a 'procedural' feedback loop of experience (Murray 1997: 152). When engaging with interactive work it is highly likely the participant will therefore think about what the designer had intended with regards to the rules of the game. Audience think about this generally in terms of social expectations or how to meet with the illusory demands asked of them ('giving good audience') but with interactive design the imagined authorial design intention comes to the fore. And, when there is a sadistic relation between the designer and participant, this can position the participant as 'slave' to the 'master' designer. This means that sadism in participatory and interactive art and games makes for a particular kind of interpassive experience that needs further exploration within the Gothic genre before we can understand whether such position can reify or resist the interpassive subject within consumer culture.

In her book on *Phantasmagoria* Warner directly links the underside of the Enlightenment project to an uncanny figure within popular culture: 'If the eighteenth century set up the concept of self-possession as an ideological and ethical ideal, the present time is haunted by threats to that happy state: 'agency' and 'empowerment' are buzz words continually shadowed by their doubles, their 'duppy', their zombie' (2006: 368). There is a very clear link between the concept of the zombie and the interpassive subject of late consumer capitalism and this link is established by Warner and many others (Lauro and Embry 2011; Orpana 2014; McFarland 2015; Bishop 2015). Zombies come from a culture of:

[I]ndividuals within a world of wealth and power [...] [where] for all its insistence on choice and access and enablement strategies and empowerment, manages to communicate to many of its members a feeling of numbing and volitionless vacancy. Zombies embody the principal ghostly condition of our time [...] and can shed light on the concept of soul now [...] Zombies convey a danger to individuality and self. [The] zombie is a spectre still tormented by the carnal condition of being, especially toil (Warner, 2006: 357–359).

The zombie concept offers another way of thinking about the interpassive subject within interactive arts as it adds the dimension of sadism, labour (toil) and different levels of power (masters and slaves) to the interpassive experience of the participant:

A zombie is someone whose soul has been stolen, whose body has not exactly died but passed into the power of a magician or owner who uses it for his (rarely her) own purposes (Warner 2006: 357).

In interactive arts within horror the authorial intention is magnified because of the dominant position of the designer (owner). If we plan to go to an immersive event that will scare us, we do not plan on doing the 'scaring'. We understand that we are to be the victim, the submissive. Indeed, within the context of 'abusive games' Miguel Sicart states that players of 'dark' video games submit themselves to the designed 'suffering' in order to maintain the ideal viewer position, or, as Sicart puts it, 'complicity in the act of playing' (2015: 109). In order to maintain this viewer position, the participant (or player) asks the designer directly 'what do you want from me, I will do it'. Here, the 'doing' is fully dominated by the design. The concept of the zombie therefore brings together the form and content of participatory experience within Gothic approaches to interactive arts. And, in Gothic XR, this is where the zombie form meets Gothic content most completely.

### **The Gothic and Videogames**

Early Gothic works made monsters of the medieval and the spiritual to make way for the logical scientific enlightened subject. Gothic expression therefore both reveals contemporary anxieties while, at the same time, reasserts the 'normality' of the enlightened subject by setting these anxieties within a contained 'supernatural' reality separate from the everyday home of rationality. The Gothic was, and remains still, a place for 'feelings, desires and passions' that compromise this project of rationality (Smith and Hughes 2002: 1). While the nature of these anxieties has changed with time, so have the Gothic forms and expressions. Kelley Hurley has pointed out that the Gothic revival of the last decades of the 19th Century were more horrific in graphic and visceral representations because of the anxiety generated by

scientific discourse that 'served to dismantle conventional notions of the human' (1996: 4–5). Such as, for example, evolutionism, sexology and criminal anthropology. The psychoanalytical explorations by Freud in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century progressed the Enlightened subject in its attempt to rationalise the fears and anxieties in the form of the 'other'. This anxiety over the status of the subject meant the emergence of the Uncanny within art, literature and film. The Gothic content of the late 20th century has dismantled ideas of the nuclear family, race, gender and sexuality and the postmodern subject (Botting 2013). Most recently, Neo-Victorian Gothic portrays the Victorians as 'damned' to prove our own liberal, ethical subjecthood (Kohlke and Guteben 2012: 11). This includes the othering of technological imperialism in steampunk and the 'Eco-Gothic' where violence against nature renders our culture 'vulnerable to almost total destruction' (Kohlke and Guteben 2012: 18).

The view that Gothic genre is seen as being 'made' for video games is shared by many in the field (Whittaker 2007a, 2007b; Newman 2008; Rouse 2009; Kirkland 2011; Perron 2005 and 2018). However, Gothic videogames in our culture today can be seen to be a lower form of Gothic expression and few can be seen to be associated with contemporary anxieties with any real depth (Newman 2008). Many share the same stock devices to shock and scare (much like the scream factories in popular entertainment culture). However, Fred Botting has pointed out that there are similarities between attacks on eighteenth century Gothic fiction and criticism of contemporary videogames (2002). The dismissal of the early Gothic novel has been discussed by Robert D. Hume (1969) where he offsets the common view that early Gothic novels have 'nothing but amusement value' (1969: 287). A closer look at Hume's analysis illuminates the possible direction of travel for the Gothic videogame within the genre and sets up a framework of practice that enables us to identify videogames that have a deeper engagement with the Gothic genre.

As well as a 'considerable amount of concern for interior mental processes' the early Gothic novel aimed to 'involve the reader in a new way' and did this via 'shock' and 'alarm' (Hume 1969: 284). Hume claims that these early novels are 'terror-Gothic' novels and differentiates them from the later publications. He develops Ann Radcliffe's definitions that radically divide the concepts: terror aims to produce an

'affective' response that opens the mind by 'awakening the faculties' and therefore 'expanding the soul'; horror, on the other hand, freezes and closes the mind due to its aim to cause revulsion. Hume disagrees with Radcliffe's assessment of horror within these novels and claims that, beyond the revulsion in horror, the reader engages directly with ideas that contest his or her own moral stability. Terror is dependent upon suspense or dread and holds the reader's attention through the fear of what 'could' happen. This is the strategy behind many 'survival horror' games, a genre of video games where the focus of the game-play is on surveillance – 'scanning [the] environment for cues to danger' (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2019: 122). Whereas with horror, the reader is 'attacked' directly with events that shock or disturb. For Hume, these horrors include events such as murder, torture, or rape, and they give way to the reader finding 'himself involved' with these activities 'beyond recall' (Hume 1969: 285). It is not the repulsive situations of horror that defines the horror-novel but the 'psychological consistency' within these repulsive situations that compels the reader to imagine themselves at the hands of these crimes.<sup>1</sup> With terror, the distinction between good and evil is clear. With horror, monsters are not merely monsters – they were once human; they were once us.

We can find evidence of such destabilising horror within the field of video games today. Isabella van Elferen orders survival horror games within three categories. These categories form a scale that measures the level of 'stability' of a player's gameplay. Starting from playing an avatar who is a 'fearless winner' in the category of 'Dark play lite' we then go to the 'hazy play' category where the player realises (with horror) the 'damaged psychology' of the character they play:

[...] in the Silent Hill games, the survival horror paradigm received an important update. Instead of a fearless winner, you play an unheroic flawed character whose perceptions cannot quite be trusted. [...] the gameplay

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note here that Hume's development of Radcliffe's definitions of horror and terror develop in a different direction to Perron (2012) and Rockett (1988), where horror is subordinated to terror and seen only as a physical threat.

obfuscates the clear good/evil, winner/loser, and masculine/feminine binaries of traditional survival horror (Van Elferen 2015: 232).

Similarly, in horror-novels Hume states that they reflect the confusion of good and evil with a 'villain-hero' protagonist (1969: 287). But it is in van Elferen's final category where we can really see how the Gothic form is developed within the interactive component of the video game. In 'pitch black play' the players 'own darkest worries reappear from the corners of unconsciousness' (Van Elferen 2015: 239). These games are known as psychological horror games and prompt the player to recognise the insanity within themselves that already existed before playing the game. 'Psychological horror games, of course, are distinguished from other forms of Gothic because of their insistence on interaction' and this interaction extends to the real-life space of the viewer (Van Elferen 2015: 238). Perron's account of his experience of playing *Eternal Darkness* perfectly captures dark play in action:

*Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* is known as 'the first example of a game that plays the player' (*Gamespot.com*). In that sense, the game stands at the limit of the temporary world it creates and the ordinary world where it is played. It possesses a Sanity Meter visible on the inventory screen. This meter decreases every time we encounter a monster. Once it falls very low, it makes weird things happen to our avatars, game-world, television set and console (i.e.: sounds of someone being tortured in another room, a room where we enter is upside-down, our avatar turns into a zombie, we have a "disk error", etc.). [...] Personally, during "A Journey into Darkness", I wondered for moment – even after the end of my game session – if I had made Edwin Lindsey shoot directly at the screen accidentally, leaving buckshot holes, or if it was really an insanity effect triggered by the game system as the result of my action. I was made to lose control of myself.' (Perron 2005: np)

In pitch black play it is the player who 'is played' and subjected to the abuses of the game design to the point where they (potentially) lose a sense of the division between fantasy and reality, physical space and virtual space, self and other. This

idea of 'being played' is where the gothic content meets the gothic form of the interpassive zombie-participant – where the designer (subject)/design (object) can be seen to 'play' the player. The true nightmare is that in psychological horror games we play the insane zombie who is 'passed into the power of' the imagined designer of the experience. As clarified by van Elferen, with the Gothic '[t]he ghost is in the machine as well as the new reality that the machine creates' (2009: 125).

### **Examples of Gothic XR – *Whist* and *Doom Room***

I participated in *Whist* at the Festival Theatre in Edinburgh in 2017 and the following analysis is based upon my own personal, singular, experience of the piece for the purposes of exemplifying the idea of the interpassive subject position within XR. The tag line on the publicity materials for *Whist* is: 'Your instincts will guide you through a narrative [...] exploring the story from one of the 76 different perspectives' (Foumi and Nakamura, 2019). Here, *Whist* immediately positions itself as offering the kind of 'freedom' typical of interactive technologies, while also acknowledging the interpassive underside to this subject position: let your unconscious do the 'interacting' for you. I was introduced to this idea before the experience when I was told that my journey through the house would be decided by what I 'looked' at within each virtual room in the VR space. Within the VR space (a 360° video with interaction via the participant's gaze direction) *Whist* set up a classic Gothic fiction: I was placed inside a disheveled house, ready to explore a labyrinth of rooms that contained scenes of Freudian taboo desires. During the experience I navigated between this virtual house and the physical installation (with my visor as Augmented Reality). Within the VR fiction I was situated as a ghost, hovering in rooms and 'possessing' other bodies and objects.

At the end of each scene within the VR space, my visor changed to AR and I was back in the physical room surrounded by sculptures and other people wearing VR headsets. In this physical space I moved between large abstract geometrical minimalist sculptures that were in part trompe l'oeil – most of these sculptures 'appeared' to melt into the ground. The only relationship I had with the physical world while I was inside the VR was the feeling of my feet on the ground. The melting

of these sculptures into the ground, along with the trompe l'oeil 'black holes', gave a kind of tongue in cheek 'nod' to the precariousness of my perceived place of safety. The sharp logic of each shape was dispersed by the fluidity of the trompe l'oeil effect – again, a nod towards the status of immersion (as fluid) as the place where there is a breakdown of rational logic. Some of the sculptures loomed over me with what could be described as an anthropomorphic presence. But all of these 'uncanny' aspects of the physical space were presented *at a distance* – as if to symbolise the uncanny rather than actually 'be' uncanny or conjure up its feeling. The interpersonal space was, in this way, presented as the epitome of rationality; mastering the illogical and the irrational. My 'home' was not unhomely as it presented the familiar icons of a 'tech' wearing audience and the overwhelming reality of the atrium of the Festival Theatre in Edinburgh. This reflects what Freud's Psychoanalysis was attempting to do with the status of the irrational – to make it accountable within scientific logic. Everything that was happening in the VR space was safely contained within this 'normality.' The clear division between real space and virtual space was left perfectly intact. Therefore, although there were many tropes of the uncanny that threatened to 'play' my reality, rational dichotomies were reinforced.

The rooms within the VR space worked like a Rorschach image – my activity of 'seeing' promised to reveal something deeper about myself that I did not already know. At the end of my experience I was to be given a unique code that I would input online to reveal this. I was to imagine that each room I entered was because of what I had looked at within the previous room. But since I had no previous experience of the game, I could not compare the consequences of my looking with what I might have seen instead. Nor did I know what item I had looked at that had triggered the next scene. My apparent activities then, did not feel like they had any relation to my consequent environment. The machine was given my feedback (movement) and this feedback was the random actions of my head, adjusting its location. I was certainly just 'doing' and moving through space *like* a zombie, but significantly, I did not sense that I had a master. This is a perfect example of interpassivity outlined by van Oenen. But although this interpassive experience was being doubled here,



within a creative context, it served only to extend the ideology of interactivity. After all, I was still under the consumer promise of it revealing my true instincts online.

The separation between the physical and the virtual space in *Whist* was clear. I encountered trompe l'oeil on the outside and I was to play the ghost on the inside. This is a kind of re-enactment of interpassivity, and one that could be seen to operate at the level of 'terror'. Horror, unlike terror, adds a sadistic aspect to the zombie-participant. A sadist pre-empts you well and, within this perfect anticipation of your thoughts, a sadist gets you to believe in it/her/him as an imaginary master. The function of sadism within the concept of the zombie-participant is that it *manages* to torture you – to really get to you psychologically via your physical activity. Any sign that there is no sadist, and just a naïve viewer who 'believes' in the trompe l'oeil, then you become the interpassive subject 'giving good audience' for this naïve viewer. It is for this reason the zombie-participant is critically reflexive and does not extend the interpassive experience.

In *Doom Room* I experienced horror through psychological instability, reminiscent of the psychological horror game. *Doom Room* begins with a live performance where six audience members are led into a room lined with black plastic walls and engage in a cult-like ritual leading to the VR experience. Following the VR experience is a live performance of a re-birth into our renewed reality, positing the VR space as a kind of uncanny womb. The producer states "We hope *Doom Room* creates a space where we are allowed to tear down this framework of our self-constructed identities. A space to let us reflect on the question of self" (Damsbo in Holmes, 2017).

The sadistic element of the interpassive role began immediately in *Doom Room* where the solo performer forced me to kneel, hold raw meat (a heart) and have my hands washed, all the while, continuously staring me down. This dominance felt sincere but intense and unnerving at the same time. It was like being under the trance of a cult leader. With her intense stare directly into my eyes (for what seemed like forever) she appeared to be trying to break my 'playing of audience' and bully me into allowing her into my private emotional reality. She was trying to 'possess

me' psychologically. This unnerving experience was presented as a kind of 'rite of passage' to the VR experience, where I was dressed in robes and a headset. In the 360° VR video I listened to a calming voice that gently awoke my senses into the present environment through a discourse of mindfulness. In my first-person viewer position I sat in front of a dead deer in the woods and contemplated the world before turning a shotgun on 'myself'. This prompted the start of a series of suicides. For the Enlightened subject suicide was rationalised as a sickness to be cured and therefore no longer intentional: 'The very notion of suicide as an intentional act dissipates in the course of its scientific reassessment' (Higonnet 1985: 105). However, in literature, it is also seen as a last attempt at self-possession through a profoundly private experience. This could be seen as the ultimate staging of interpassivity where the 'other' endures it for 'me' (as in the classic videogame). But these suicides felt like a series of exhaustive attempts to desperately try to get out of, or beyond, the enslaving loop of technologised space. For me, the monster was presented as this loop – the virtual space itself. As with Gothic fiction, this places the 'virtual' as being the violent 'nightmare space of the dream' (Law 2006: 993).

In the final scene in the VR world a woman walks towards me and unmask herself to reveal a covered mouth and blind eyes. The visor then changes to AR and I see the other five participants next to me but they were also wearing the same robes and visor so I could not see their faces. I realised that it was not possible to know whether it was a pre-recorded version of 'audience' or actual people standing next to me. Then, a man in the distance began to approach me slowly and steadily, looking



**Figure 1:** *Doom Room* by Makropol. Photo: Paul Winter. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.

directly at me, gazing into my 'eyes'. I still do not know whether it was VR or AR. As he came closer, I think I began to sense his actual presence, but I was not sure. The 'normality' I could regain from the usual intersubjective encounter was not possible under these circumstances. Then, someone lifts my visor – it is the same man, but I'm still not sure whether I was previously watching him as a recording or not. He lifts my visor to 'restore' my vision. I wonder whether I can really see at all. Like Frankenstein's monster I was reborn as a zombie.

An engagement with the Gothic form is not about giving or taking away our agency, or about directly challenging the interpassive subject position outlined by van Oenen. The experience of the zombie-participant is individual and psychological and questions the possibility of agency itself within any system, including an interactive one. The Gothic disorients our clear rational understanding of the dichotomies set out by the rationality of the Enlightenment. It does this by disorientating us and making us question the limits of what we are (and what we are not) and how much that can be measured by what we do (and what we do not do). Interpassivity can be pleasurable because we play out the romantic and Cartesian belief that the activities of the body are not where the self lies. I am interacting, but only physically, my body is doing something – but I am not. Perhaps the pleasure in this reification comes from the removal of any responsibility one feels one should have over one's bodily actions within the pervasive world of interactive media. Being reminded that the zombie you must play in an excessively interactive society is not 'you', which momentarily disconnects 'you' from its ideology.

### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

### **Author Information**

Sarah O'Brien is a Principal Lecturer in the Department of Communications, Arts and Media at Teesside University. Her research focuses on participatory performance, technology and the role of the audience. Sarah also creates performance and installations that explore themes of agency, empathy and responsibility. She has worked on many interdisciplinary projects with Sociologists, Designers and Developers.

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